

The remarkable story of charismatic and Pentecostal churches

TEASA: 2-3 August 2022

The Pentecostal movement started around 1906 in various places around the world. One such revival was at Azusa Street, Los Angeles. At the beginning of the third millennium, there were two billion Christians worldwide, of whom 65 million were Pentecostals, 175 million were charismatics, and 295 million were neo-Pentecostals.¹ Ten percent of the world's population or one-third of all Christians are part of the broad Pentecostal movement.²

To what can the movement ascribe its remarkable growth, especially in the global South where poverty is endemic? I argue that the answer to the question requires a consideration of Pentecostal hermeneutics.

To understand Pentecostal hermeneutics, one should know what role theology has been playing within the movement. From the start, the movement was negative about theology and theologians. Pentecostals perceived theology and well-trained reverends to be why worship in the established mainline churches was formalised and “dead.” From their perspective, theology and sermons concerned with acquiring knowledge about God are unprofitable because it does not transform people's lives. Instead, they taught that people should meet and know God in person. As a result, the movement lacked any initiative to become involved in ecumenical endeavours or provide grounded theological training for the greater part of its history. In fact, for the first thirty years, Pentecostals had no professional ministers. Instead, denominations certified Spirit-anointed laypersons as evangelists or assembly leaders. When they eventually employed full-time pastors, the emphasis was on the pastor's necessity to be filled and anointed with the Spirit, signified by people getting saved from sinful lives and healed supranaturally. The anointing with the Spirit served as the only condition for participating in the worship service; all believers may participate in aspects of the worship service. And this practice and theoretical stance have been continued by many Pentecostals until today. Believers' testimonies, the practice of charismatic gifts, spontaneous prayers and participatory worship, reflection, the inclusion of dreams and visions into personal and public forms of worship,

¹ Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 19.

² Emil Bartos. "The Three Waves of Spiritual Renewal of the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement." *RES: Biblical Exegesis Between East and West*. 7, no. 1 (April 2015), 20-42.

liturgical dance, and prayer for the sick and needy characterise worship services.³ The Pentecostal worldview maintains a tension between the “rational and cognitive” and “affective and experiential.”

Their lack of theological expertise implied that their hermeneutical presuppositions mainly functioned unconsciously. They seldom verbalised their hermeneutical angle. One can justify the animosity to some extent. As many lecturers at Pentecostal theological seminaries and colleges can testify, some of their students lost the “innocence of their faith” when exposed to critical textbooks written by authors that do not hold a “high view” of the Scriptures. Some students (and believers) experience it as an eroding of their faith in the Bible and the God of the Bible when they hear that diverse traditions function within the Hexateuch, that the histories of the Deuteronomist and Chronicler represent different ideological views, that biblical historiography is a form of prejudiced historical ideology or that many factual mistakes and contradictions characterise the biblical text.

Eventually, however, some Pentecostals realised that rejecting all theology is just too expensive to pay. It led to a movement without a solid historical theological grounding and a tendency toward naïve and dangerous literalist Bible reading practices. The situation today is complicated. Most Pentecostal leaders and believers accept that all words and texts are placed on the same level and given the same authority because the Spirit inspired them, and they read these texts as literally as possible. Rosina Gabaitse calls this an unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutics, in distinction from an articulated Pentecostal hermeneutics that Pentecostal scholars have developed since the 1990s.⁴ The unarticulated hermeneutic found among most Pentecostals determines their way of thinking about God and the Bible, their songs, sermons and how they pray.

However, during the past thirty years Pentecostal scholarship attempted to develop an articulated hermeneutics although a consensus among Pentecostal scholars on a reading approach which reflects their community’s reading practices does not exist. Instead, the attempt included that scholars forced Pentecostal reading processes into unfamiliar and perhaps incongruent categories.⁵ In order to be “critical,” they associated with established hermeneutic

³ Walter Hollenweger, “The Pentecostal Elites and the Pentecostal Poor: A Missed Dialogue?,” in *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*, edited by Karla Poewe, 200-216 (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1994), 201.

⁴ Rosina Mmannana Gabaitse, “Toward an African Pentecostal Feminist Biblical Hermeneutic of Liberation: Interpreting Acts 2:1-47 in the Context of Botswana” (DPhil diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2012), 77.

⁵ Yong, *Discerning the spirit(s)*.

practices of Evangelical (particularly historical-critical approaches) or post-modern approaches.⁶ While some attempt to escape traditional Pentecostal literalist interpretation, others use Evangelical categories to escape the challenge of a plurality of “postmodern” readings inherent in the charismatic experience.⁷ So the debate for an appropriate description of Pentecostal hermeneutics continues as scholars attempt to integrate their Pentecostal experience into the “horizon”¹² of the text.

Another aspect is that Pentecostals, as a rule, see the relationship between God and the world from a pneumatological perspective. Amos Yong calls the Holy Spirit the most fundamental symbol and appropriate category for referring to God’s agency in the world.⁸

Early Pentecostals presupposed that the Holy Spirit was a central and essential part of the early church’s life and individual Christians, as portrayed by the New Testament. From their perspective, in time, the church diminished the stature and status of the Spirit, only to be revived in the pneumatological emphasis the Pentecostal movement (claimed it) brought in the twentieth century by recognising the need for the Spirit’s presence in their midst. Ironically, Pentecostals also experienced that a third and fourth generation significantly lost the emphasis that the Spirit and charismatic gifts enjoyed among the earliest Pentecostals. But is this view correct? Did the church, through the ages in general, betray the Spirit?

To answer the question, John McIntyre analyses taxonomically various accounts of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit over centuries that represent diverse cultures and traditions.⁹ His historical study led him to admit that the church, through the ages, has not entered into the entire strategy of the Holy Spirit or adequately attempted to implement the Spirit’s tactics.¹⁰ However, he is unwilling to admit that the church betrayed the Spirit or the Spirit’s work, and I support his contention. The church never ceased to refer to and expect the Spirit’s work. Still, it neglected to give it the same attention as the early church probably did, given the significant influence the events on the day of Pentecost exercised in its origins. McIntyre admits that the early Christians saw the Spirit’s involvement at every point of their lives. They expected the Spirit’s participation when they made decisions, as Acts 15 illustrates and perceived that the Spirit

⁶ Grey, Jacqueline. *Three's a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament* (p. 37). Pickwick Publications, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers.

⁷ Cargal, “Beyond the fundamentalist-modernist controversy”

⁸ Amos Yong, *An Amos Yong Reader: The Pentecostal Spirit*, edited by Christopher A. Stephenson (Eugene, OR: Cascades, 2020), 1.

⁹ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Pneumatology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 235–236.

¹⁰ McIntyre, *The Shape of Pneumatology*, 285.

cooperated with them when they planned evangelical missions, solved interpersonal conflicts, preached, baptised, or made moral decisions. The official Western church, through the ages, clearly did not enjoy the same effects of the Spirit's work. However, that does not imply that the Spirit was not involved, although not necessarily in the same kind of extraordinary phenomena that the book of Acts relates.

Another vital element that needs to be emphasised is that most Pentecostals accept the experiential orientation that influences their epistemology and the doctrinal and experiential appropriation of this in Spirit baptism, highlighting, among others, tongues-speaking and the rest of the spiritual gifts.¹¹ As a result of the emphasis on the experiential, Pentecostal doctrines are not abstract speculations but living facts experimentally known and described narratively in the form of testimonies. They do not base their beliefs primarily on cognition but on life-transforming comprehension. Doctrinal "truths" are also not to be viewed as absolutely orthodox and unchangeable. It can be challenged and overturned. The central emphasis is not on absolute teaching and propositional statements of truth that one must accept but on a direct relationship based on encounters with God that may hold many surprises over time.¹² Instead of theory proceeding to provide the foundational rationale for practice, underlying much of the Western philosophical tradition, Pentecostals see theory as the reflective moment in praxis, uniting them into the same activity.

Not all agree with the theses that Pentecostalism began with experience and that its essence can be found in its experiential angle in Bible reading practices. For instance, Lee Chang-Soung argues that the essence of Pentecostalism is not experience but theology.¹³ He asserts that the Pentecostal movement starts with and is perpetuated by Bible study for a specific theological theme, implying that Pentecostalism started with theology. Only from experience introduced and induced by their study did early Pentecostals' experiences follow. In other words, the movement was perpetuated with a process consisting of theological Bible study (for example, to answer the question, "What is the biblical evidence of Spirit baptism?") that led to the extraction of a theological hypothesis from the study (in this case, speaking in tongues). And only then did the experience follow (they spoke in tongues), confirming the hypothesis. In other

¹¹ Jacqueline Grey, *Three's a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament*. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 15.

¹² Scott A. Ellington, "Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 9 (1996), 17.

¹³ Lee Chang-Soung, "In the Beginning There Was a Theology: The Precedence of Theology over Experience in Pentecostal Movement." The article was originally written in the Korean language, printed in the *Journal of Yongsan Theology* 32 (2014), 71-96, and translated by the author himself

words, Pentecostalism established its principles through the experiences of what the Bible teaches. The implication for him is clear: theology precedes experience for Pentecostals. Hence, theology has precedence or priority in the Pentecostal movement.

In response, it should be noted that Chang-Soung does not acknowledge the custom among Pentecostals to interpret the Bible in the light of their experience of the Spirit's presence and their past charismatic experiences. These two factors serve as the condition for Bible reading to qualify as Pentecostal. Their *Vorverständnis* or preunderstanding determine what they see and understand in the Bible and apply to their lives. As in all Bible reading practices, they are "prejudiced" by their experience and expectation of the Spirit's involvement in the process of interpreting the Bible. For that reason, Chang-Soung's emphasis on the precedence of theology over experience in the movement cannot be accepted. The lack of theological depth among many early and current Pentecostal church leaders proves Chang-Soung's supposition false.

The last observation is that Pentecostal praxis should be, and at least initially, was informed by empathy with the poor and marginalised, challenged, and rejected people of society that characterised Jesus' life. The early Pentecostal movement found its most significant growth point among these people. As a result, many of the earliest adherents, including the leaders, came from the ranks of drunkards, criminals, the poorest of the poor and the rejected and marginalised of society. Therefore, orthopraxy-orthodoxy must be informed by critical reflections on other people's suffering, moving theology into the community-on-the-margins where poverty, famine, and suffering debilitate and ruin people's daily lives.¹⁴ Pentecostalism would only then live up to its status as a resistance movement against what early Pentecostals perceived as a cold, creedal, and cerebral Christianity that left no room for poor and hurting people or marginalised sinners that characterised many (or some) (Western) Christian churches.

¹⁴ Archer, "Pentecostal Way of Doing Theology," 310.